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Seeking a Comprehensive Worldview: The Religious Seeker in the Modern World

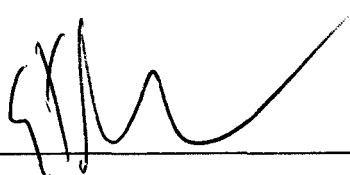
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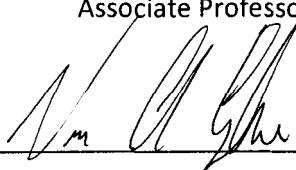
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Anecdotally, the casual observer of anthropological phenomenon may be led to believe that every human is basically the same. Indeed, many may assume that groups of people possess identical beliefs, religions, and expressions that hardly vary across different cultures and generations. Throughout the plethora of different cultures and the countless varieties of religious expression and experience it may seem that all of humanity is merely following the same lifestyles and worldviews as their parents and ancestors with very little change save for the gradual evolution in society. A religious studies scholar, or any scholar of the humanities, however, may notice that each member of the human race is possessed by a distinct uniqueness and freewill all his own. Those of us in the modern West, as this essay will hold, are distinguished by our inalienable ability to choose worldviews and beliefs unique to ourselves. The capacity for changing and improving one's religious mindset does not follow the same progression that biological evolution does – slowly over time – nor do changes in religiosity occur wholly within the group. The capacity to question, change, and even travel between one religious world view and another is a trait inherent in all of mankind and occurs independently at a unique pace as an individual sees fit. This paper will postulate the existence of a religious seeker as a state of change that anybody under the proper conditions can enter into. That is to say, those of us privy to the eclectic religious melting pot of the west or civilizations connected by Western thought creates the ideal conditions for the genesis of religious seekers within its population. The religious seeker, while subject to the legal assumptions of religion of his country at the time; is free to alter, reject, and obviously: seek a better and more comprehensive worldview in order to better his own existence both individually and socially.

Foremost, establishing an analytical seeker type is paramount to understanding the exact nature of a religious seeker. The keyword here is “religiosity,” or the distinct quality possessed

by the seeker that compels that individual to seek a comprehensive worldview. Alternatively, other varieties of seekers exist such as able-bodied voters transitioning between political parties or newly graduated college students searching for their first jobs. Even the most mundane realms of experience are frequented with their own unique brand of seekers such as sports fans adopting a new favorite team. For the sake of this essay, we must familiarize ourselves with the religious seeker who yearns for a deeper subjective experience into the realms of the invisible. The religiosity of the religious seeker stems from this inherently private reality that generally remains separate from the secular socio-political realms in the West although it is surely been known to overlap. While the sought sense of religiosity may be developed by a number of unique sources, which will be discussed later, the attitude of the religious experience remains the same. The ideal religiosity that the seeker would desire to cultivate is a unique private experience that provides a suitable worldview into the nature of the invisible realm. The sought worldview is private in the sense that the seeker is the only human privy to the exact dogma, creeds, and doctrines of the chosen worldview. Regardless of the source; be it a communal indoctrination or private theological study, the seeker's novel worldview is ultimately developed within the privacy of the individual mind and enjoyed as such. Furthermore, the nature of a complete worldview entails a distinct comprehensiveness in that the worldview can provide answers for the facets of life that are not provided for by secular society. This subjective experience into the invisible entails a separate reality from the everyday secular realm. Therefore, a religious seeker is in search of an entirely new perspective on metaphysics and the universe as a whole. A complete worldview must address several major issues namely: the nature of the invisible realms, the hierarchy of the universe, and the possibility of an afterlife. Finally, the newfound religious beliefs of the seeker

may instigate a change in certain characteristics of the seeker's worldly life in order to better appreciate and adhere to important declarations of faith.

Secondly, we must identify the varieties of comprehensive worldviews available to the religious seeker in our modern day world. That is not to say we should identify and scrutinize every possible sect and extant world religion, but I will postulate that several categories of religious worldviews do exist. The most common of these categories include: communal religious gatherings, entirely private spiritual beliefs, a hyper-extreme system of cult-like beliefs, and a distinct rejection of transcendent spiritual truths. The first category is the most common religious experience involving a community of believers. The communal category enjoys the majority of mainstream Western civilization as well as the most influence in the public sphere wherein secularism and religious ethics mesh and support each other. The second category involves those individuals who consider themselves "spiritual" but not necessarily religious. The belief patterns exhibited by these people are often colorful and eclectic; having been taken from a variety of sources available in the melting pot of a globalized world. Thirdly, there is the religious experience most associated with cults and new religious movements that exist on the fringe of society. While every religion becomes alienated from alternative varieties of comprehensive world views, the hyper-extreme system isolates itself from society and forces the adherent to tend to a world view that is essentially parasitic. While society often puts of safeguards to protect its citizens from falling into the influence of a cult, cults themselves attempt to lure religious seekers into their clutches with the most savory of spiritual promises. Finally, there exists worldviews that protest against the idea of an invisible world and humanity's reliance on it. These worldviews are extensively philosophical in nature and pull their beliefs from a world of rationality and humanism. Examples include: atheism, agnosticism, and systems

often deemed religious by some but whose exponents insist the religious qualities of their practices are nonexistent or even transparent. National religions as well as worldviews that exercise wholly humanistic traits over service to the invisible or divine also fall into this final category.

Thirdly, it is appropriate to historicize the concept of the religious seeker as the following essay does not follow a timeless mode of consciousness that has existed within the minds of all mankind for all time. Rather, the religious seeker is an archetype unique to modern Western civilization particularly in the United States. As we will explore in later sections, the seeker has emerged as a product of the eclectic religious melting pot of the modern West and travels between various comprehensive worldviews before settling on whatever appeals to the seeker the most. The modernity of the religious seeker has been established in order to distinguish seekers as a new archetype within the varieties of religious experience. Previously in the history of the United States, being American was synonymous with being an evangelical Christian with only some differences between in liturgy and theology separating denominations. The sheer number of different comprehensive worldviews, however, as well as individual components of these worldviews that can be adopted and interwoven into preexisting beliefs, greatly separates the past evangelical Christian who merely changed denominations to the religious seeker who envisions a completely new outlook of the universe.

1. Communal and Private Religious Systems

When studying a religion, scholars are most likely referring to a community of believers who adhere to a similar world view (Epstein, 2009; Taylor, 2007; as cited in Newton & McIntosh, 2013). Communities of religious followers can be witnessed in contemporary society

in such forms as neighborhood churches, temples, or gatherings at public schools during weekends. Indeed, the religious seeker is virtually guaranteed to find a tradition with proclaimed adherents should he search in the modern United States. Often times, communities of believers can have thousands or millions of people who claim membership. Thus the religious seeker can establish a common identity with other believers as well as learn from their collective knowledge of their respective religious system. Sometimes this newfound identity may stem from a global collective of people and establish an almost nationalistic mindset (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). Alternatively, a religious seeker may find solace in a worldview that is unique to his current community or even the world at large. A unique worldview can be adopted from a multitude of different sources and reflect the sheer eclectic nature of contemporary society. So much literature exists on a variety of different religious traditions and how to practice them not just in the form of books but over the Internet as well (Campbell & Golan, 2011). The ability to instantly receive religious guidance from sources across the world gives the religious seeker virtually limitless options to either adopt a worldview held by multitudes of exotic followers or even create his own religion to suit his needs.

To begin with, the communal religious experience is the most populated variety and available to the religious seeker in virtually every city and province in one form or another (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). This is because humans are social creatures and often look for camaraderie and acceptance in many facets of life, religion included. The mere psychology of the communal experience would show that the religious adherent is being reinforced or rewarded in some way for attending the community event and interacting with the congregation. Some followers who regularly attend communal gatherings will attest that their religious experience is bolstered by the presence of likeminded fellows. Other devotees may consider the entirety of

their spiritual life to be a product of the communal experience and could hardly imagine being deprived of their place of worship for long (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; as cited in Newton & McIntosh, 2013). For some, the structure or house of worship itself may acquire a sacred, almost totemic, meaning. In this case the mind of a totemic worshiper is set on the inanimate or abstract body of the church rather than the community of people who gather there to receive the blessings of the divine. Others still may associate the community with the same totemic power in which the physical gathering of likeminded people facilitates some kind of spiritual salvation.

Furthermore, the communal experience can even manifest over vast distances and across the minds of millions of adherents of a spiritual system. While some believers may be content with following a relatively small congregation in their hometown, others begin to identify themselves with various distinguished groups. By the same effect the religious seeker may desire to take a title for himself in order to be fully initiated into his chosen religion. Such a title therein denotes the seeker as an established believer be he now a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Wiccan, or whatever the believer feels best categorizes himself as a member of his faith. Even then, the seeker may continue to identify himself by the particular denomination or sect that he now belongs to by awarding himself further titles so that he identify with an even more select distinction of other people. Not uncommonly has a religious tradition used the title of their particular denomination to set themselves above other members of the original religion (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). A common mindset may be that while other traditions share the same message of truth and salvation, the offshoot that the seeker now believes in is seen as following the original message to its highest esteem. The distinguishing mindset of belonging to a specific group can then encompass the seeker's community and current living environment as well as a nation, culture, or even a commonality on a global scale (Campbell & Golan, 2011). In this case,

the seeker's new religious tradition may involve more than just a pattern of beliefs and customs but may require belonging to a certain ethnic community or living in a country described as sacred by religious doctrine. Oftentimes, national religions will find their genesis in the totality of the state or certain movements will mimic the stereotypical secular nature of the state as a theocracy (Cavanaugh, 2009). Regardless, should a seeker choose a communal religion it will most assuredly cohabit in his community and have room for additional devotees within its ranks.

Alternatively, the world has become such a place that a religious seeker can acquire a complete spirituality without the presence of a preexisting religious community. A plethora of ways to acquire various spiritual traditions and techniques are available in modern society; most profoundly through literature and the Internet (Campbell & Golan, 2011). Education in world religions and the social sciences as early as public school may be enough to inspire a religious seeker to begin studying and adopting a new religion. Upon even conducting a brief study such as skimming a book, the seeker can go about constructing a new religious movement based on a small collection of selected beliefs that appeal to him. In recent decades, the United States has witnessed a massive increase in the number of new religious movements due to the eclectic variety of spiritual systems and the religious freedom that has permeated America since its beginning (Cowan & Bromley, 2008). In order to be successful, a new religious movement should generate the same religiosity in its followers that a mainstream religion does. The religiosity of its followers allows the new religious movement to showcase a variety of strange practices that its adherents will consider rational and necessary. Furthermore, while a majority of these new religious movements have been accepted by society in general, a select few are often persecuted as extreme or even cultish. These so called cults and the religious seekers

participation with them will be expanded on in chapter 5. For now, elaboration must be made on the eclectic buffet of spiritual traditions and worldviews available to the religious seeker as well as the seeker's freedom to reject these beliefs as he sees fit.

Oftentimes, a private religion may not be entirely unique to its propagator but merely unique to the environment at the time. In the contemporary United States, for example, it would not be impossible for a member of community to develop religious themes displaced from those of the majority. Rather, it would seem that a greater variety of religious expression has arisen even within the most isolated of American communities (Campbell & Golan, 2011). As human society has become more globalized, the tendency for a community to possess wholly homogenous religious values has become less likely unless the community desires isolation from contemporary affairs. The most profound facilitator of novel spirituality seems to be the Internet; from which a seeker can amass a huge database of religious history, tradition, techniques, and – most importantly – a facsimile of a religious community (Campbell & Golan, 2011). Even a religious adherent who is not seeking a new comprehensive worldview could potentially find solace through an online community of likeminded fellows. A religious community that already features some kind of authoritarian structure can utilize the Internet to pass new doctrines and decrees to devotees instantly regardless of location (Caplan & Stadler, 2009; as cited in Campbell & Golan, 2011). The Internet serves adherents and seekers alike by providing useful information on preexisting religious systems that can be used to expand upon or create a religious tradition.

2. The Nature of the Invisible

The act of adopting a particular worldview requires the religious seeker to scrutinize, either consciously or intuitively, several factors that will define his chosen religious tradition. Chief among these factors is an understanding of invisible realms and is what separates a spiritual worldview from a more mundane mode of community thinking such as a favorite sports team, political party, or college fraternity. While world views about the material world may appear outwardly religious such as establishing the classic “us vs. them” mentality common among both religious thinkers and secular group members a distinction can be drawn between the religious and irreligious through empirical evidence. While reliable measures of political favor and participation exist, it remains difficult to accurately judge a person’s level of religiousness (Hall, Koenig, & Meador 2010). Although we lack proper measures of religiousness, scholars can still identify behaviors and beliefs that are inherently religious and study them as such. Emerging from his existential crisis, the religious seeker will have found a perspective of the subtle workings of the universe that he takes to believe as truth (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). Views on the invisible realms are surely as numerous as the religious traditions they are associated with, therefore, for the purpose of brevity we shall focus on the two essential views of the invisible – the immanent and the transcendent.

In truth, the immanent realm is the most “visible” face of the invisible; although it still requires a specific viewpoint apparent in the religiosity of the believer. The process of making one’s specific god-head immanent requires the religious seeker to invest one or more physical objects with a sort of totemic power (Pork, 2013). This charged object becomes a reality unique to the religious believers that revere and maintain it in such a way that the religious practices and lives of believers center around this object. The size of the immanent reality and the power attributed to it also varies highly between religious communities; for example: a sacred religious

icon may be regarded with higher esteem than a sacred mountain range or vice versa (Pork, 2013). It is also possible that a country or entire ethnic race could be regarded with a greater degree of sacredness by believers over other more “mundane” regions of the planet. A religious seeker, upon attaining a new level of religiosity, may indeed gain a certain respect for an immanent aspect of the invisible realm and feel compelled to adopt a behavior based around a religious object. The seeker may believe in completing a religious pilgrimage to a sacred place in order to ritualistically render his transformation finalized and emerge as a proper member of his chosen religion (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). Furthermore, the same immanent totemic power can become associated with a particular person; generally a religious leader or figure of some sort. While outsiders will regard religious leaders as on par with the rest of humanity, religious adherents will perceive their leaders as physical intermediaries of some transcendent spiritual reality (Cowen & Bromley, 2008). The totemic power of the religious leader often exists in a moving state of personality and charisma that a leader can utilize to invigorate the comprehensive worldview he stands for and lead his followers through the process of spiritual refinement and evolution as per his system. Alternatively, the religious leader may utilize his charisma towards more selfish ends and abuse the totemic power invested in him by believers in authoritarian ways. In this case, the religious leader stands for less of an imminent reality and more for political, social, or economic purposes (Lalich & Lagone, 2008).

In contrast, varieties of transcendent realities are also available to the religious seeker depending on what comprehensive worldview the seeker settles upon. The transcendent aspects of the invisible are difficult describe without delving into the esoteric or abstract layers of theology. Transcendent realities relate to the realms of the invisible that are not connected symbolically to a physical person, place, or object but instead stem from the sacredness of

thoughts, concepts, and ideas (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). A religious seeker who ascribes to a more transcendent worldview may begin to recognize certain ritualistic behavior as a method of communicating with a divinity that lacks a substantial physical form. In this way, intermediaries still exist within the immanent world that religious adherents can utilize in order to establish a connection with the transcendent invisible realm (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). Furthermore, methods generally exist with various comprehensive worldviews that enable believers to come to the conclusion that they can indeed merge with the transcendent reality; usually after the demise of the immanent physical body (Exline, 2002). Due to the inherently unseen nature of the transcendent, certain immanent features are often in place in order to remind believers of the sacred ideas that uphold the transcendence of their particular worldview. Alternatively, the immanent intermediaries may lack the necessary totemic power for some religious seekers (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). Therefore, any connection to the transcendent ideas will either be missing or entirely nonexistent resulting in the absence or rejection of a transcendent spiritual truth (as discussed in chapter 6) although a comprehensive worldview remains intact.

3. Hierarchy of the Universe

Coupled with the religious seeker's realization of the immanent or transcendent nature of the invisible realm is a newfound perspective of the seeker's place in the universe and all other entities contained therein. Much in the same way the divine can be perceived as immanent, transcendent, or nonexistent altogether; the seeker's perceptions of the hierarchy of the universe can vary between acceptances of an invisible or purely material reality (Exline, 2002). While detailing the entirety of the seeker's possible views on reality would take a work of literature comparable to Frazer's "Golden Bough" we will briefly examine the two poles of the spectrum, namely: the acceptance of divine sovereignty and a completely humanitarian stance. Establishing

and these two poles is important because they will illustrate the levels of sacredness that the seeker attributes to the initially mundane world so that it may gradually emerge as the invisible realm.

The dynamic between divine sovereignty and a humanitarian stance is the degree to which the religious seeker accepts fatalism and a concept of freewill. Total acceptance of divine sovereignty effectively puts the religious adherent at the mercy of the creeds and doctrines of whatever comprehensive worldview he subscribes to (Coates, 2013). Basically, those who surrender themselves to divine sovereignty begin to exhibit behavior and make decisions based on the portfolio of ethics dictated by their religious worldview and extant religious leaders. That is not to say the religious seeker should necessarily fear the loss of his free will upon ascribing to a novel worldview. Rather, the religious seeker will be subject to a new code of ethics that govern behavior in the way his religious system states is best for believers to follow (Newton & McIntosh, 2013). Many adopted behaviors gained by surrendering to divinely mandated doctrines may suggest a belief in some sort of covenant between the mortal believer and the invisible realms; whether transcendent or immanent. The religious seeker may be attracted to the specific doctrines of a religious worldview especially if they promise the attainment of certain boons either in the living life or in some form of afterlife (Coates, 2013). These specific attainments can manifest as either transcendent or immanent although the belief that one possesses spiritual gifts falls more into the transcendent category as these ideas are, in essence, a sacred product of religiosity. One example of a more immanent attainment would be the promise of superhuman or divine abilities that establish the adherent as superior to others in some form by virtue of his faith. Therein, the religious seeker develops a sort of religious narcissism by

submitting to his new worldview in that he believes he is blessed by the sacred ideas he now carries with him (Exline, 2002).

In contrast, the humanitarian dynamic emerges from religious seekers who lack the totemic power of transcendent or immanent religious objects and ideas (Epstein, 2009; Rambo & Bauman, 2012). For these religious seekers whatever sacredness could potentially be wrought from the invisible realms often manifests instead as camaraderie towards mankind all more dependence on the ethical doctrines set by society and the secular. The religious seeker who ascribes to a more humanitarian stance invests himself with the same power generally reserved for religious leaders in that the seeker is free to establish his own code of ethics and morality without necessarily having a religious inspiration for what he feels is right (Epstein, 2009). Furthermore, the society the religious seeker belongs to could also be seen as enhanced with a particular sacredness as the ethics and actions of a humanitarian adherent would act in accordance with the customs and laws of that society. In this case, the religious seeker who rejects transcendent spiritual truths still possesses a comprehensive worldview even though this worldview is separated from the realms of the invisible.

4. Changes in Lifestyle

A common criticism against religion in America is that many Americans who were raised religious and claim to follow their original religion do not display any major religious activity in their behavior (Hall et al., 2010). Initially it may seem strange to think that religious people can essentially exist in a state of irreligiousness or apathy to their own worldview but these accusations are based primarily on anecdotal evidence. Exact methods of measuring religiousness are nonexistent or depend on certain limited elements exhibited by some and

completely absent in others (Hall et al., 2010). Therefore, while some people may be satisfied with a superficial religious experience, scholars are unable to accurately place each person's subjective beliefs and worldviews on a definite scale of religiousness. Instead, fruitful research on a religious lifestyle can be done by examining an adherent's particular behavior and how it defers from other behaviors typical of the secular sphere of his culture. As a religious seeker approaches a concrete reality, in that he now truly "believes" in his newfound worldview, certain changes can be witnessed in his behavior both by the seeker and by others. Furthermore, the mentality of the religious seeker will change as he begins to understand the unique language and rituals of his new religious system. Finally, the religious seeker will eventually become so engulfed by his newfound religion that he will become alienated from others who do not share his specific worldview.

A variety of examples of believers wearing their religion can be found throughout society. Subtle ways of broadcasting a particular religion are as common as a Christian wearing a cross necklace, a Sikh donning a turban, or a Muslim taking time out of her day to pray. More overt examples would include the full body attire of the Hasidic Jews or the Amish that serve as reminders of their specific lifestyle as well as an advertisement of the religion to others. Regardless of the intensity of one's dress, the reminder of the adherent's religious faith is as apparent to others as it is for the devotee. Having taken up a comprehensive worldview, the religious seeker may be inspired to declare a title for himself and begin dressing in the trappings of a proper adherent of the specific religion (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). In this case, an observable culture will have been adopted alongside the respective religion that gives the seeker access to the exclusive enclave of religious jargon, traditions, and cultural identity that only believers are privy to. Upon looking the part, the seeker may also wish to tread beyond

superficiality and begin acting like a believer (Rambo & Bauman, 2012). In this case, the seeker becomes aware of specific dogmas, practices, and taboos that either establish his identity as a believer or uphold the order of the universe. The conscious process of believing may not be enough for certain religions that alterations in physical behavior such as abstaining from alcohol and mind altering substances, adhering to particular dietary laws, or even avoiding contact with the opposite sex in one way or another (Exline, 2002). The presence of inward and outward rituals and practices serves to establish lifestyle changes in accordance with the seeker's new worldview. Defining characteristics also serve to separate believers from nonbelievers in a variety of different ways.

American society is home to dozens of so called "world religions" and hundreds of lesser known new religious movements and yet people of vastly differing worldviews are capable of civilized conversation. This is because regardless of what religious traditions people may be subject to they are unified by a large secular sphere of existence (Cavanaugh, 2009). One can think of the secular sphere as a unifying worldview for a large number of people. Therefore, while subgroups of a Western country's population may adhere to different religious, political, and economic worldviews the collective identity (e.g. American) remains constant. Nonetheless, certain characteristics of distinct group mentalities still manifest themselves even when subject to the reign and jurisdiction of the secular state. A religious adherent's life may focus almost entirely on their religious practice and lead them away from the common lexicon of the secular sphere. Nonbelievers may be regarded as alien to such a religious person as they are incapable of speaking certain doctrinal jargon and lack understanding in important abstract concepts (Exline, 2002). A more extreme version of religious isolation will be covered later in the section on cults but for now we can understand where a distinct "us versus them" mentality may arise between

followers of different religions. The mindset of “us versus them” has often been blamed for instigating conflict throughout history when religions have been romantically depicted as battling it out over which religion is the “right religion.” Clearly, however, a variety of factors are present in any major conflict such as economic, political, and social issues leaving religion as a secondary factor at best (Cavanaugh, 2009). Occurrences of religious intolerance in modernity, particularly by religious extremists, suggest that religions can clash resulting in violent outcomes. Should the religious seeker be wary of attaining a violent disposition upon his newfound spiritual awakening? The answer is of course “no” because any violent attitudes develop from the social dynamic (Cavanaugh, 2009; Coates, 2013). Still, potential exists for certain religions to judge others as sinful or improper, thus adding discomfort to the social dynamic.

Section 2

At this point, one can imagine that a truly open minded religious seeker would possess the propensity to join any manner of worldview available to him. The key concept offered by any complete religious worldview in this case is its comprehensiveness. That is, – the worldview is one that caters to and explains any possible spiritual question the seeker may have about the nature of the invisible, hierarchy of the universe, and the seeker’s specific place in the grand scheme of things. The seeker is also given the option of forming a communal bond with some form of religious gathering or adhering to a uniquely private religious experience in accordance with his free will and inalienable rights of religion. Seemly, the majority of the time a religious seeker in the United States will fall in love with a healthy comprehensive worldview that allows for a positive transformation of his spiritual and mental wellbeing. Sometimes, however, the religious seeker may be indoctrinated into a tradition that is less than wholesome to his spiritual

health. Other times, the seeker may reject any acceptance of transcendent spiritual truths in favor of a secular worldview of sorts that still answers his questions in a comprehensive way. In the following sections we will examine both ends of the religious spectrum with the hyper-extremism of the religious cult and the apparent apathy of the atheist and agnostic.

5. The Hyper-Extreme Cult

Throughout history various societies and religious traditions have labeled other traditions as heretic, fanatic; and in the previous centuries, as cults (Cavanaugh, 2009). These titles are generally the result of the previously described mentality of “us versus them” or the general ignorance of the beliefs of a certain group of people; even if the group exists within one’s own culture. Due to the variety of social issues that play into the “us versus them” mentality the exact distinction between a cult and an ordinary religion remains uncertain (Cowan & Bromley, 2008). In order to create a workable classification of cults as opposed to an unorthodox, yet harmless, new religious movement the author will postulate the concept of “hyper-extremism.” A religious tradition that could be labeled as hyper-extreme if it follows practices generally common throughout other traditions but approaches them in a harmful or irrational manner. These practices include: the isolation and alienation of the tradition from others in society, the promises of the spiritual transformative element experienced by an adherent, and the belief that members of the cult play a crucial role in a coming new age. Additional criteria for hyper-extremism would be the totalitarian rule of authority figures over the spiritual and oftentimes secular lives of believers (Lalich & Lagone, 2009).

So far, the premise of the religious seeker has been an individual with curiosity and intrigue inasmuch that he may travel in between comprehensive worldviews until he finds one

that he prefers most. The key attribute of the religious seeker in the West is the ability to pick and choose his religion and in effect, customize his worldview to best suite his needs. Ideally, the new worldview is compatible with both the invisible realms as well as the secular realm. Thus, the religious seeker begins to exhibit personal changes, wear his religion, and has his actions influenced by his new worldview but remains a member of American society. The hyper-extremist, however, tends to isolate himself further away from society to the point where he becomes alienated from his native culture. The occurrences of cult communes and isolated subcultures in the United States could therefore be seen as hyper-extreme in this regard (Cowan & Bromley, 2008). The isolated hyper-extremist is removed from the public forum of his secular society and thus is immersed entirely within his worldview. Furthermore, the stereotypical cult-leader often appears as a religious authority with the same manner of charisma and totemic power as any mainstream spiritual leader. The hyper-extreme leader is more interested in personal prestige rather than acting as an intermediary between the invisible realms and his followers. Such a leader often requires personal sacrifices on behalf of his followers that results in additional socioeconomic power for the leader rather than the individual spiritual transformation that his followers initially sought (Lalich & Lagone, 2009). In essence, the hyper-extreme leader acts as a negative aspect of religious seeking or at least leach-like in how he dictates the lives of his followers. Therefore, while the religious seeker generally desires some form of structure in his newfound worldview, he should be cautious to just what kind of authority he conforms to.

6. Rejection of Transcendent Spiritual Truth

In the same way a religious seeker may settle on a hyper-extreme comprehensive worldview with apparent negative consequences to their wellbeing; it is possible for a seeker to

diverge into the opposite end of the religious spectrum. Such a seeker herein develops varying degrees of “hypo-extremism” although they rarely exhibit complete apathy towards religious experience altogether (Exline, 2002). An adherent of a hypo-extreme tradition still maintains a comprehensive worldview, although this worldview is not subject to the general theology and creeds of a more mainstream religion or even a hyper-extremist religion. The beliefs of the hypo-extreme are merely less fantastic and are often based on the empiric evidence of modern science rather than the irrational faith associated with even the most well populated religious movement (Hall et al., 2010). The atheist or individual who rejects the existence of a deity or invisible realm altogether fulfills this specific type. Alternatively, a seeker who has settled on a hypo-extreme worldview may be indecisive as to the exact workings of the universe and elect to remain neutral on his opinions of the grand design. Such an example would be the agnostic who can be seen as a religious seeker who has effectively stopped seeking or has taken a temporary hiatus on his quest for a comprehensive worldview.

7. Why Religious Seekers Matter

Religious seekers are a historic type of individual that have existed since man has been able to forge his own religion, form opinions about his particular religiosity, and move in between different religious traditions. The religious seeker remains active in our modern world, even more so than any other time in history, due to the sheer number of possible worldviews that can be formulated and adopted. The contemporary world has given rise to the idea of world religions, new religious movements, as well as hyper-extreme and hypo-extreme varieties of religious experience that impact our globalized society through the thoughts and actions of the physical adherents. Seekers serve as intermediaries between comprehensive worldviews including the secular sphere and intrinsically private realm of religion. The religious seeker,

therefore, allows knowledge to be exchanged more freely between theological sources. This knowledge can also be transmitted to other seekers or inspire those unsure of their current worldview to become seekers themselves. Furthermore, as modern culture changes in structure and form, religious movements will be unable to cope with new contemporary issues unless they receive constant feedback in the form of media criticism and the quandaries of their followers and aspirant seekers. Therefore, the flow of religious seekers through various traditions creates the necessity for apologetics and the gradual change in the essential nature of a religion over time. Some religious movements, particularly those that are regarded as unorthodox or frankly unusual will benefit from curious religious seekers approaching their tradition and spreading knowledge of the relative normality and harmlessness of a religious movement unknown to the rest of society. Finally, the assumption of the religious seeker type has a variety of benefits to the individual seeker himself. Individually, seeking a comprehensive worldview offers buoys to one's mental constitution against uncertainty of a hostile or unfamiliar world while limiting apathy for one's self and others. As a communal benefit, seeking a comprehensive worldview gives hope and camaraderie to a likeminded group of people thus granting strength in numbers. This collective strength gained by believers gathering together aides the survival of culture and influence over the world.

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